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ABSTRACT

The uncertainties and issues in our society are not peripheral to but intrinsically a part of English, the author of this paper argues, and more alternatives in English are required to accommodate the diversity of life styles and value systems among students. If the English curriculum cannot grapple with these forces, then it deserves to be absorbed by other components of the curriculum. The most significant change in the subject-matter which will help insure the survival of English is the focus upon the learner in the learning process. The role of the teacher should become that of facilitating the learning process as a resource person rather than as a dispenser of facts. The focus of language instruction should rest with what the child can do with language since it exists within the student's power to create, rather than with following the textbook mechanically, chapter by chapter. Options must be broadened to include oral language and film experiences, open classrooms, and a sincere humanization of pedagogical approaches. Caution needs to be exercised so these innovations don't become the means for teachers to keep at "legitimate" distances from students. The needs and concerns of the students must be considered, and teachers must try to be human beings first and teachers second. (HS)

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Speech to be given at the 1972 NCTE Convention in Minneapolis

ENGLISH in the Context of Survival: Changes Before It Is Too 1990

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The prophets of doom tell us that "time is running out" and that the "lead time" we had ten years ago has been misspent and squandered. Our alternatives are fewer today; our chances for survival, less probable. We have courted our rendezvous with disaster; we anticipate its result, almost sensing its outcome before the tragedy ends.

The twilight of an affluent society silhouetted against the smog-covered skyscrapers and the poluted streams. A testimony of what technology has wrought, of what repression has ironically produced. Political promises of hope and religious vows of faith have been strained to their limits. The pleas of youth have been muted by a generation who promised answers to our problems. Now the whispers of youth seem to mock us in reverence of our age and our failure. The institutions America has held dear are deteriorating. The plight of alienation is apparent in our schools and churches. The wars on foreign soils have waged deeper conflicts of values in our own land. Our government -- yes, even the family as the basic institution in our society -- has alienated our youth rather than alleviated the problems facing America.

Three years ago our convention convened in Washington, D.C.; two years ago in Atlanta; last year in Las Vegas. The issues we as English teachers have contended with over the past three years parallel the unsteadying influences within our society. In 1969 the NCTE membership needle wavered slightly because of a resolution introduced at our business meeting that concerned the Viet Nam Conflict. English teachers becoming involved at their convention in

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the issue of war? In Atlanta we debated hesitantly a resolution dealing with campus unrest and the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Then this past year in Las Vegas we cautioned ourselves and our publics on the use of standardized tests and raised the question of student self-evaluation in the learning process.

Our concerns as English teachers have been broadened in both scope and significance and will continue to be increasingly shaped by the realization that what is happening around us -- outside our classroom and the covers of our materials -- is not peripheral to but intrinsically a part of what we now know as "English."

The changes reflected in our subject matter are but a microcosm of the significant events which have taken place in our country over the past several years. We have watched our youth change, and have asked why. We have seen them flaunt their naked bodies in the pool of the Lincoln Memorial. We have viewed 250,000 of them on television at Woodstock as they smoked their pot to the accompaniment of acid-rock music. We have read with fear how they ensnarled our nation's capitol in a War Moratorium; how they battled the police in Chicago, "The World's Friendliest City," during the Democratic Convention; how they confronted the National Guard in A Separate Peace setting of Kent State. America's youth have mirrored the problems besieging our society, the confrontation of value systems in our culture

What has happened in our society and throughout the world requires us to adjust our approach with students, our perspective of what we want to happen in our classroom. Kent State, Viet Nam, My Lai, Lt. Calley, legalized abortion, the price freeze, bussing problems, inadvertent bombing of the dikes and the French Embassy, the Watergate affair: the '72 scene is different in Minneapolis then in November 1971 in Vegas. Just as we have been changed by what has happened, our students are not immune to these same phenomena that affect their

lives. If we were eight, twelve, or sixteen again, we may find ourselves more vulnerable to the uncertainties of the times and less tolerant of old responses to new questions today. We live in unsteadying times, and the contemporary soothsayers tell us that the tempo of life will not level itself out, that America is not becoming Greener, that Future Shock is becoming a present tense.

It is these uncertainties in our society that require us to provide more alternatives in English to accommodate the diversity of life styles and value systems among our students. Alternatives: the chance for more children to succeed through education. Without alternatives, we can anticipate that youth will continue to drop out of our schools and to participate in subcultures featuring value systems that rub abrasively against each other. If the subject matter of ENGLISH does not allow itself to grapple, with purpose and urgency, with those issues and concerns that affect not only our relationships with fellow man but also our very survival, then ENGLISH deserves to succumb to the fate of being absorbed by other components of the curriculum.

Many changes have already been effected in the manner of how teachers use English to help students understand themselves and the world they live in. Those of us who have taught more than ten years are certainly aware of these changes. And those who have learned with their students for more than twenty years are cushioned by the wisdom of their experience in perceiving that some of our "innovations" today are merely reruns of similar programs that had their premiers many years ago.

This is reflected in a conversation I had with an English teacher who has taught for many years and who was not particularly ecstatic with the craze of changing from year-long required English courses to shorter term elective courses. For her, "electives" have been around for years, as have "open" classrooms, "continuous" learning systems, and "student-centered" curricula.

Twenty years ago she was teaching alternate units in English; exchanging units with fellow teachers; giving her students choices and alternatives in units, novels, and composition activities; sending her students to the library for independent study (Resource Centers weren't IN yet.) or allowing them to work in small groups in the hall. Many of our supposed innovations today were found in the country school concept of the early 1900's -- without the price tag of the carpeting ("accoustically treated" floors), computers, and movable walls.

Although we are providing more alternatives in the materials and definitions of ENGLISH, I believe that the most significant change in our subject-matter, a change that will likely hold more students in school and will insure the survival of ENGLISH in the curriculum, is the focus upon the learner in the learning process. Our subject-matter is allowing itself to be a vehicle in helping teachers learn with their students. As teachers, we are becoming learners in our own classrooms. In this role, we see even more clearly the need to accommodate the divergent life styles of our students as we closely interact with fellow learners once the classroom door is closed -- if what we know as the "classroom" must have a door.

In the maze of accountability literature and in light of Toffer's warnings, we must make ENGLISH more malleable to the forces amassing in our culture. Nuclear power, cybernetics, overpopulation, pollution, mechanized learning, and electronic surveillance all pose a threat to the survival of man. Out of this turmoil, however, will emerge even greater diversity rather than increased standardization among men, particularly because our approach will become problem-solving oriented in a human context. Our survival will be predicated more upon our ability to cope with these forces rather than upon knowledge per se. The role of the teacher becomes that of facilitating the learning process as a resource person rather than a dispenser of facts or a reservoir of knowledge.

The curriculum, by necessity, must focus upon process rather than on product. Arthur Combs, past president of the ASCD, and professor of education at Florida State University, has said that we can no longer require the same curriculum of every student: "The information explosion has destroyed that myth."

This means that we can no longer rely on one textbook. There must be alternatives. The focus of language instruction should be on what the child can do with language, not on what he cannot do. As a process, language is an art of building, creating, revising; not the tedium of tearing down, analyzing, correcting. Language exists within man rather than without: within the student's power to create rather than within only the textbook to be followed mechanically, chapter by chapter.

We know that children learn differently and that learning does not take place in the same way or at the same pace for any two children. Materials in the English program, therefore, must be diversified enough to accommodate these realities. The student who has difficulty in reading should not be penalized for his handicap in our English classes. With tapes, films, and kits; through creative drama, role playing, and other oral communication experiences, we must help each child to succeed in language rather than to fail. We need to broaden the definition of English to the extent that it will unlock doors for children and allow every child, regardless of his ability, to experience success in school. In short, we must increase the options, provide more alternatives, tailor our program to different interests, strengths, and weaknesses of children.

ORAL language experiences are an essential base for students to mature in their use of language. We all recognize the carry-over from the use of oral language to the critical skills required in the reading process. For too many years, too many children have failed in their education and dropped out of our

schools because they could not read. How long will reading as a skill dominate our program and determine whether a student succeeds in our schools? When will we modify our grading system and tailor our program accordingly to fit these students who have difficulty decoding language but who, if given the opportunity, could learn through other media? The counterpart of the national Right to Read Program must be the Right to Succeed Policy which requires every teacher to make provisions in his class materials and activities to allow each student to succeed if he makes the effort.

The world of literature is no longer restricted only to those who "read"; the film experience is now an important and legitimate dimension of the literature program. Library shelves share book space with cassette tapes of literary selections for children who read with their ears and can perceive the world around them if they are given the chance through alternative learning styles. Students who have been consistently defeated by the challenges of written composition may succeed in alternative approaches in composition as a process through filmmaking. Our assignment for tomorrow, regardless of whether we teach 4th graders, an elective course in Great Writers of the Western World, or a class in freshman composition, must feature alternatives for students: choices that require them to decide which alternative is appropriate in terms of their abilities, interests, and vocational plans. Our role as English teachers is to unleash, through language, the power of every student to lift his sights and achieve his potential.

The alternatives in our classroom environment imply clearly how we perceive not only the process of language development but our role in that process. Quiet homes, addicted TV viewers, and hushed classrooms do not encourage the use of language. Silence is not always the best environment in which to learn. Studies show that in most classrooms, the number of oral utterances by each child is very small each day. This is, ironically, as true in the language arts

class as in any other classroom. The arrangement of chairs or desks reflects to some degree the teacher's attitude toward oral language experiences in the learning process. Compare the typical kindergarten room arrangement of tables to facilitate oral interaction among the children, with a typical tenth grade English class that has five rows of desks facing front or the college classroom that has the same rows of chairs facing the front, with the embellishment of a lecturn used too often. If our subject matter is children, regardless of age or the walls of grade levels, and our vehicle to help them is language, we need to develop strategies that enable teachers to be comfortable in working with children rather than imparting treasures of knowledge to get them through their next test.

Providing alternatives may disturb many teachers who wish to maintain a safe distance from their students. We must be careful that our attempt to personalize and humanize our program is not done with, paradoxically, the very instruments that work to dehumanize our approach and make it impersonal. Learning packages are on the tail winds of the behavioral objectives and PPBS is in the wake of the behavioral objectives -- the year's work (job specifications for students as well as for machines) in 43 packages, taken at your own rate -- "stop in when you have a problem." Many innovations hold promise but require caution in their implementation. The very means to bring teachers closer to students may be the avenues that can drive us apart -- if we are not careful.

In other words, our hurried scramble for open schools, newer materials, really "in" elective courses, individualized instruction through personalized machines, complex scheduling procedures could be subtle means to camouflage our desire to maintain a safe distance from our students. Rather than bringing us closer together as human beings, our obsession to be current and innovative and our desires to be accountable to others than to our students could provide "legitimate" means for us to keep the learning process at arm's length.

Although the elective-English concept has added motivational adrenalin to English programs, many elective English courses developed across the country have been too narrow in their scope and have, consequently, lost sight of the fact that the inherent characteristic of any English course should be the integration of the language arts. Whether the course is "Science Fiction -- Fantasy" or "The American Sampler," students should benefit from language arts experiences which are integrated, not fragmented into exclusive language, literature, or composition offerings. There are enough departments within our educational program without making the subject-matter of English departmentalized.

Elective programs provide many alternatives for our students. However, some acclaimed programs featuring numerous course offerings have, ironically, forgotten to provide alternatives for individual differences within each course. Departments that have rigidly phased or tracked their elective courses adjust their classifications within several years because the student does not necessarily elect those courses that his teachers feel are the most appropriate for him. This practice requires us to moderate toward the position that some courses become "all-phase" courses geared to all students. These courses must have varied alternatives for students of many abilities and diverse vocational plans. For example, although the course "Sports: Action through Language" may be geared to reluctant readers or low achievers, several very capable boys may elect this course because of their interest in sports; consequently, they deserve to be challenged through alternatives provided within that class. In several years this course may have, if it survives, a heterogeneous enrollment; and its survival depends upon our willingness to adapt its content to students, rather than to mold students to the course.

Alternatives in English do not give blanket endorsement to every new concept on the education market. The advances in education deserve -- even demand -- the

deliberation of careful testing and research before the packets, objectives, and systems are unleashed on students who look to their English teachers as guardians of the humanities. It is easy though time consuming to write performance objectives requiring a given number of correct responses, but it is difficult to legislate the humanity of the staff that is to observe those behavior changes in the students. Our students today want instructors who are human first and teachers second.

In spite of what some prophets say about youth, students look to us to work with them, to provide alternatives for them in seeking answers to the questions that have always faced man: What is human spirit? What drives man to realize his potential, to find himself? What responsibility does a country have in following its collective conscience -- our role in Viet Nam, the Middle East; the welfare program that doesn't reach the 300,000 Americans who go to bed hungry each night; the Title I programs that fail to reach the many students who are to benefit from such assistance? How can an American today reconcile the contradiction of priorities -- for us to allocate 10½ million dollars to the Defense Department for an advertising campaign to attract men to enlist in the service, and for the same administration not to have 2 million dollars to advertise the food stamp program for the thousands of Americans who would qualify and could benefit from the program if they only knew about it?

How do we reconcile that nearly 100,000 American men ran away from the Army alone in fiscal 1971? How troubled is our sleep, how disturbed our conscience to think that at least 10 million people in the world, mostly children, will starve to death this year and each year not only this decade but throughout this century? And even more discouraging, it is too late, according to Dr. Ehrlich in his book The Population Bomb, to save many of those who are starving. Even if couples produced no children other than merely to replace

themselves, the world population would not level off until the year 2050. Each week the world population increases in excess of one million people.

And for a country priding itself in being a leader of the free world and a protector of smaller countries preyed upon by aggressors so that their citizens may determine their own destiny, how does it set with us in America that 10% of all American Indians over the age of 14 have had no schooling? What has America chosen in alternatives to expend in 1972 on Man's Space Flights to the moon over 1½ billion dollars and still not be able to provide on our planet, adequate schooling for all of America's children, let alone invest sufficient financial resources to alleviate the critical problems of starvation, pollution, cancer and heart diseases, and natural resource depletion.

We need to concern ourselves with these issues in our English classes, even though our discussion of these problems may borrow at 1% interest ten of the 36 days that we spend on grammar instruction -- in the name of "because English teachers are supposed to teach grammar." We cannot afford to plead "lack of relationship to English" when, on the other hand, we contend that the raw matter of our discipline is the problems and nature of man, the language of understanding that will bring man of different races, different backgrounds, varied cultures together. The literature of Homer and Shakespeare; the questions of Ghandi and Thoreau; the dreams of Martin Luther King and James Michener -- all of these men have shared with us the truths, the aspirations that Robert Frost speaks of when he says,"Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

We need to reckon with the walls of alienation and drugs, the fences of discrimination and prejudice. This generation, like previous generations, is confronted with critical problems. Overpopulation and starvation. Pollution and destruction of our natural environment which we have taken for granted so long. The trends toward a mass culture and urbanization. The threat of drugs must be combated with the same vigor that put man on the moon in the 60's.

Over the past ten years our attention has been diverted from the death toll attributable to drugs to the toll of the Viet Nam War that has ripped our society apart and confused our priorities. In what ways should we rebuild America, with our youth as the major architects in the reconstruction? The future is truly problem-centered.

Our task in education is to provide children with the skills of problem solving in order that they may steer Spaceship Earth into the future. The child in California who reads that entire forests in his state are dying; the student in New York who wonders how long before his city like Tokyo, will feature coin-operated oxygen dispensers along the street for people overcome with exhaust fumes; the sixteen year old boy in Iowa who wonders whether the U.N. scientists are correct when they predict that by the time he is forty, the world will be uninhabitable: the students in our English classes are not separate from but a part of the world outside the classroom. They are troubled. They are living in a time when society is changing more rapidly than in any previous age, and the rate of change is accelerating. Margaret Mead describes today's youth as "faced with a future in which they cannot know what demands will be placed upon them." Their ability to cope with these rapidly changing demands is one of the survival skills that must emerge in the learning process.

The problems facing our society are the link between English as we have known it and English as it has to be defined to survive in the real classroom outside of school. Time is not running out if we accept the fact that alternatives in learning as well as alternatives in the teaching of English are prerequisites to the survival of our subject matter in an age of upheaval. Where we have changed already has shown students that learning can be "the best of times, not the worst." Not a season of darkness but a time to give our students no less than the best of tools -- a compassion for and understanding of the world they live in. But we need to bring that outside world into our English classroom.

The acid test of our success or failure will be ten years from now when we look back upon the 70's and assess whether we had the fortitude to preserve the human qualities of teaching, the commitment to provide more alternatives for children to succeed in learning, and the depth of compassion to respond to the changing needs of our students. A challenge it is, but the stakes are high. We have no other alternative in the context of survival.